



Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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My History from childhood to liberation to retirement

My name is Leon Shear. I was born February 15, 1927 Lazer ben Zvi Yehuda Szejer and Blima Szejer in the city of Bedzin, Poland. I have a brother Shiah Wolf Szejer who was born December 25, 1925. My sister Henna Szejer was born in 1930. My brother and I are the sole survivors of the Holocaust from my immediate family.

We lived in a three-bedroom home. My brother and I shared a bedroom. My father was a wholesale distributor of calf meat. He took orders from the butcher shop. He then ordered the live calf from the Non-Jewish Polish farmers. The calves were delivered to a kosher slaughterhouse where the calf meat was slaughtered. My father leased a horse and buggy that delivered the calf meat to the butchers.

My father worked on weekends as a stand up comic at a Jewish Theatre called the Muza Theatre. The money that was raised from the Theatre was given to charity. I was not allowed to go to the actual shows, but my family would always go to the dress rehearsal. Sometimes my father left for a couple of days to travel with the show.

My mother was a homemaker. During the week she cooked, baked and sewed. When she was finished with her responsibilities, she would go to visit my aunts that lived near by. On Saturdays she volunteered at the Jewish Old Age home. After we returned from shul on Saturday, she prepared lunch for us then she would leave for the Old Age Home. Sometimes she would make my brother, sister and I go with her.

I went to a Jewish private school when I was six years old. I learned Polish history, mathematics, reading and writing. Only Jewish children went to this school but we did not learn about the Jewish religion at this school. At 3:00 p.m., I walked to Cheder, the Hebrew school. I was at Hebrew school until about 5:30 p.m. At Hebrew school I learned to read, write and speak Yiddish and also learn about the Jewish religion.

I wore a uniform and hat at school. All the boys at school had to have their head shaved. We wore only white shirts and our shoes had to be polished. We had to wear slippers in school, as we were not allowed to wear our shoes in classes. We ate lunch at school, which we brought from home. I always gave my lunch away because I did not like to eat food, but I would always finagle money from my uncles or father so that I could buy chocolate on the way home from school.

I had lots of friends. I was always the leader of the pack. My friend and I were always getting into something. In the summer we would swim at the lake. I would go some evenings with my father to his Zionist meetings. I spent evenings doing homework. We ate dinner with my family together every night. My mom always covered the table with a white tablecloth.

On Saturdays, we had to return back to Cheder after lunch. We had to study Chomesh with the Rabbi. My father would always check with the rabbi to see if I went. If the rabbi would tell my father that I was not there, my father would give the rabbi a few coins for letting him know. Then my father would punish me and not let me go out to play.

My grandfather had a butcher shop with my Uncle. On Fridays, my grandfather would close his shop at 2:00 and we would go together to the mikvah and the steam bath. I would carry his towels and soap. My father's parents did not live too far from us.

In my home we had a bathroom with a bath. We had cold running water. To have a bath, we had to fill up the hot water heater, which was run by coal and wood. Then we would put hot water into the tub to bathe.

In the summertime we would go to the Polish mountains. We rented a cottage. We would hike, swim, and visit the towns in the mountains. We would go to the mountains by bus. We would stay in the mountains for a month or two. My father would go back and forth to the city to take care of business.

September 1, 1939 Germany attacked Poland. As a child, I did not know much about Germany. When the Germans attacked Poland, my parents decided to run away from the city of Bedzin. We walked several days with others from the town to another town. We took what we could carry. We leased the same horse and buggy that delivered my father's meat, to carry our personal belongings.

We saw the Germans in this town and they rudely told us to return to our homes. When we returned to our home in Bedzin, the Beth Hamidrash was already burning to the ground. We returned to our house and found that the Poles had ransacked our home. Proclamations were on the walls everywhere stating that all the Jews living in the area were going to be assigned to another place to live.

We had to turn in all gold, jewelry and radios to a certain area in Bedzin. We were given one room for my family of five to live. The cooking arrangements were shared with the other Jewish people. This is the beginning of the ghetto living.

My father was unemployed and was not allowed to work. We were given a white armband with a blue Jewish star to wear while we were in the ghetto. We were not allowed to attend school anymore. We were not allowed to return to our home. The Germans made the Jews in the Ghetto form a Jewish committee. This committee formed a Jewish police force.

The chief of the Jewish police force, Barblatt, gave the orders to the rest of the police to help keep the people in order. A declaration ordered all available people to go to the Judenratt to register for work. My father, mother, brother and I were assigned to different jobs.

My father and brother worked in construction. My mother worked in a soup kitchen. I worked at the Shuppa polici – the German Gestapo, shining shoes, cleaning the dog kennels, and carrying coal and wood and other errands. I worked there seven days a week, from morning to night. There were approximately seven cells that held Jews and non-Jews. After interrogating Jewish prisoners, I saw them shot to death.

My family was not aware of what the future held. The atmosphere was changing everyday, but it seemed as if we were taking it one day at a time. We had no idea that any of my family would be murdered.

My brother was the first to be taken away. At first, he would return once a month to visit. I was taken one day from the Gestapo and put on a truck and taken to Auschwitz. This was February 1942. I was in Auschwitz from 1942 to October 1944. While in Auschwitz in August 1943, I saw a train from my hometown coming into the camp. I watched the people coming off the train to see if I could spot my family. To my sadness, I noticed my mother and sister getting off the train and heading to the gas chamber. It had been 1 ½ years since I had seen them and now they were killed.

Sometime while I was in Auschwitz Birkenau I was told that my father was there but had swollen feet and was sent to the hospital. One day, when I was trying to see if I could find my father I was told that he was no longer at the hospital. Without exact proof, I can only imagine that he was killed. If he had been alive I would have found him.

I was shipped to Sachsenhausen camp in October 1944. A few months later I was shipped to Oranienburg for a 3-4 months dismantling Russian and American planes that had been shot down. After Oranienburg I was sent to Dachau concentration camp.

In 1945, I was on a death march to the mountains. At night we stayed in the woods. On May 3, 1945 all of us prisoners got up in the morning and noticed that there were no Germans surrounding us in the area. The Koppel, head of the prisoners, told us to stay put and that no one should leave the area.

We thought that we would see a German truck and that the Germans would kill us with machine guns. Instead, we saw about 6 green tanks with white stars. We thought at first that these were German tanks. To our surprise, a black man stuck out his head from the hatch of the tank and screamed "America – America" gesticulating to himself so that we would understand that he was an American. This was in the city of Wolfrutshausen.

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We saw the Germans in this town and they kindly told us to return to our homes. When we returned to our home in Bedzin, the Reich Handicrafts was already burning to the ground. We returned to our house and found that the Poles had ransacked our home. Proclamations were on the walls everywhere stating that all the Jews living in the area were going to be assigned to another place to live.

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The chief of the Jewish police force, Barbiel, gave the orders to the rest of the police to help keep the people in order. A declaration ordered all available people to go to the Judenrat to register for work. My father, mother, brother and I were assigned to different jobs.

My father and brother worked in construction. My mother worked in a soap kitchen. I worked in the Shuppa police - the German Gestapo, shining shoes, cleaning the dog kennels and carrying coal and wood and other errands. I worked there seven days a week, from morning to night. There were approximately seven cells that held Jews and non-Jews. After interrogating Jewish prisoners, I saw them shot to death.

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We thought that we would see a German truck and that the Germans would kill us with machine guns. Instead, we saw about a dozen tanks with white stars. We thought at first that these were German tanks. To our surprise, a black man stuck out his head from the hatch of the tank and screamed "America". Gesturing to himself, so that we would understand that he was an American. This was in the city of Woburn, Massachusetts.

The prisoners started scattering around. The black man using sign language told a few of us to get into his tank and he drove us into the city. He took us into a house where Germans once lived. Using sign language we were told that we would sleep there. They gave us cigarettes, chocolates, crackers and cheeses and made all efforts to make us comfortable.

After a few days, we were directed to a deportation camp called Feldafink. I spent most of my time asking about where to find my living family. I found an Uncle, my father's brother Shiah Szejer. I was then told about where to find my brother. I found him recuperating from typhoid in a hospital in Saltzheim Germany. My uncle and I heard that our cousins were alive in Sosnowiez, Poland, so my Uncle and I went to Poland to bring my cousins back to Feldafink.

When I returned to Feldafink I decided that I did not want to live in any deportation camp anymore. I left for Staumberg, Germany and found a house and lived there until 1947. I was registered as an orphan and was put on a boat for the United States in 1947. I arrived in Cleveland, Ohio August 3, 1947 and was placed in Bellefaire Orphanage where I lived approximately one year before moving to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

For the past 51 years I have struggled to work hard, raise a family, and provide for them. I started my work in the United States as a apprentice in a tool and dyemaking business in Pittsburgh. I met a wonderful woman and she became my wife August 6, 1950. We have four children, three daughters and one son.

After 17 years of working in the tool and dyemaking business for Blumcraft Company, I started a new trade repairing washers and dryers for a cousin's business in Cleveland, Ohio. I moved my family to Cleveland in 1968, where I have been living all these years. I built a washer and dryer business. I now work with my son who is running a vending machine business. My wife retired after 42 years as a microbiologist and

